



ALEXA HOROCHOWSKI

*Beautiful Sky*

 ROCHESTER ART CENTER

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## The beauty of their city, the kindly weather of the skies

by Godfre Leung

*They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weather of the skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.*

—Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," 1973

The science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin once wrote about a city whose happiness depended on the ongoing abuse of a small child. In the short story, the child is hidden from view. However, Le Guin is very clear that for the collective happiness of the fictional city of Omelas to continue, each of its inhabitants must be actively aware that the child is suffering.

Alexa Horochowski's exhibition *Beautiful Sky* is about the choices made to sustain the ongoing conditions of our existence. Like Le Guin's story, it insists that we make those choices actively—and that we acknowledge the full spectrum of passivity to also be direct actions.

*Since 1913, the Owens River had been diverted to Los Angeles, causing the ruin of the valley's economy. By the 1920s, so much water was diverted from the Owens Valley that agriculture became difficult. This led to the farmers trying to destroy the aqueduct in 1924. Los Angeles prevailed and kept the water flowing. By 1926, Owens Lake at the bottom of the Owens Valley was completely dry due to water diversion.*

—Wikipedia entry on the California Water Wars

In one sense, at the core of *Beautiful Sky* is a residency that Horochowski undertook at the Forest Island Project, in the Town of Mammoth Lakes in Central California's Eastern Sierra. There, she visited the barren lakebed of nearby Owens Lake, whose water was famously diverted early in the twentieth century to hydrate Los Angeles and other parts of the San Fernando Valley. A century after LA Water Department superintendent William Mulholland stole its water, Owens Lake had become the site of the largest dust health hazard in the United States.

In another sense, the core of *Beautiful Sky* is not a core at all. At the center of Horochowski's project here is distance, like the distance between the citizens of Omelas and the abused child hidden from their view, or between LA, where there are faucets, and Owens Lake, where there is dust.

*Nothing happens that rises to the level of an event let alone a crisis. The small child's life-as-suffering will drift across a series of quasi-events into a form of death that can be certified as due to the vagary of "natural causes." As a result any ethical impulse dependent on a certain kind of event and eventfulness—a crisis—founders in this closet. How can one construct an ethics in relation to this kind of dispersed suffering?*

—Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 2011

Another work in *Beautiful Sky* responds to the dust mitigation process performed at Owens Lake by the LA Department of Water and Power, as ordered by the EPA when there still was an EPA. In an aerial drone's-eye-view video, Horochowski documents two-thousand-pound woven polypropylene bags of sand in long tracking shots. The sandbags hold down an enormous running tarp that covers a network of raised service roads from which the LADWP maintains brine pools and other mitigation apparatuses. The sandbags and tarp were installed to prevent the gravel roads from eroding during a particularly rainy season. Calling to mind the enormous serial outdoor works of Christo and Jeanne-Claude and Walter de Maria, they also invoke a moment in art history when sculpture became something no longer quite sculpture.

This ersatz land art mirrors another body of work in the exhibition, sculptures made from modified coir logs. These large, woven implements to mitigate soil erosion on river banks serially dot the featureless Midwestern landscape between Horochowski's home in Minneapolis and the university where she teaches—seen from behind a car windshield in the absence of a state-subsidized commuter train. The presumed solidity of the Plains sublimates and leaves two holes: her one hour and fifteen-minute commute to St. Cloud (a figurative hole in which the durative present is trapped) and the impending eroding landscape (a literal hole suspended in the speculative future), against which these coir logs perform the hole-filling function of mitigation. These holes cut through a great distance to bring us to Sri Lanka, where most coir logs in the US are manufactured. Horochowski's sculptorly touch, especially in the context of Minnesota's vaunted outdoor art attractions such as the Sculpture Garden at the Walker Art Center and the Franconia Sculpture Park, valorizes objects already manufactured by the hands of one of the world's most exploited labor forces—prominently comprised of women and also notoriously including children.

*The 280 km<sup>2</sup> dry bed (playa) of Owens Lake in southeastern California has produced enormous amounts of windblown dust since the desiccation of the lake in the 1920s due to water diversions by the city of Los Angeles. The playa is often flooded during the cool months and is underlain by a large brine pool that saturates the sediments at shallow depths; as a result, the surface commonly bears a salt crust that is extremely vulnerable to erosion by saltating particles during the frequent high winds in the Owens Valley.*

—Marith C. Reheis, U.S. Geological Survey, 1997

Plaster-cast jerrycans, commonly used to transport clean drinking water during Red Cross humanitarian missions, helplessly occupy imaginary disaster landscapes on a low plinth. Nearby, cast Styrofoam cups lie like litter on an elevated pedestal. These sculptures were all treated with salt and borax solutions to simulate the crystallization of the eroding lakebed at Owens Lake. Their crystalline sculptural surfaces simultaneously hide and augment the heaviness of the plaster material. On one hand, the salt crystals shimmer in a way that feels almost dishonest given the impoverishment they refer to. On the other, especially in contrast to Horochowski's accompanying video of actual Styrofoam cups breezily wafting about between off-screen fans, these surfaces are in fact waterless husks—any suppleness or potential nourishment sapped and dried out to leave a solid state.

Like the Owens Lakebed, those crystalline surfaces are also brittle. A light sprinkling of shed dust accompanies both sets of sculptures on their sculptural supports and, though we might from our distance imagine this dust to also waft lightly in less controlled environments, in reality it can be more devastating than breezy. Conversely, the lightness of the Styrofoam (Polystyrene) cups in the video (which invokes a sculptural lineage of interplay between surface and cavity from Bernini to Lee Bontecou to Gordon Matta-Clark) belies a density: they will never biodegrade; Styrofoam waste makes up thirty percent of the United States' landfill volume.

In his famous thought experiment, the philosopher Martin Heidegger posits that the jar, as such, is not its surface but its cavity, not its density but its emptiness. The jar holds, it pours out, it gives. Heidegger calls this essence of the jar a void; I prefer a hole. If at the center of *Beautiful Sky* is distance, then the exhibition is really about holes. Specifically, it engages a kind of hole commonly found in the openings of vessels—jars, jerrycans, Styrofoam cups—connective infrastructures by which liquid can be transported. Pipelines, the modern architectural descendant of aqueducts, are perhaps our best example: a pipeline is one long continuous hole. These kinds of holes take; sometimes they steal. They also make more holes, such as the now-emptied Owens Lake.

*In the near future, human beings can arrange things so that there either will or will not be beautiful sky. Do you wish there to be beautiful sky?*

—Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 1998

To dismiss climate science as fraudulent is a willful act. In a manner of speaking, to disavow climate change as a hoax is to acknowledge that one already knows it to be true. This is why we can't think of *Beautiful Sky*'s center as a void; it insists that we don't hide behind this kind of metaphysical profundity, or bad faith, or nihilistic oblivion, if one can tell the difference.

As I write this, in Vancouver on January 9, 2019, six hundred miles to my north the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is in the process of illegally displacing members of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation from their unceded ancestral territory, as provided by the 1997 Supreme Court of Canada ruling in *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* and as protected by Article 10 of UNDRIP, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This act of war, as members of the Wet'suwet'en First Nation have called it, has been committed in order to advance the construction of the Coastal GasLink pipeline. As of two hours ago, the RCMP has lifted its roadblock to allow media access, after blocking it for two days of violent, military-backed raids.

We cannot call our inability thus far to witness these acts of war a void, any more than we can call the center of an un-biodegradable Styrofoam cup one. This is our lesson from *Beautiful Sky*: even from distances so far that we cannot see, that we scarcely can imagine, we must perform the speculative act of imagining that we exist at the same time as the dust storms at Owens Lake, the sweatshops in Sri Lanka, Alexa Horochowski driving on the I-94, me writing this in Vancouver, you reading it in Rochester, the land defenders and water protectors awaiting the arrival of the RCMP at the Unist'ot'en Camp in northern British Columbia, and, let us not forget, the Dakota Access Pipeline continuing to transport 500,000 barrels of crude oil every day and stealing from the future.

*Godfre Leung is a critic and curator based in Vancouver. His writing has appeared in numerous magazines and journals, including Art in America, Canadian Art, The Third Rail, and Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, as well as in publications commissioned by institutions such as the Factory Contemporary Arts Centre, Museum of Modern Art, and Walker Art Center. His recent programming has included projects and works by Barbara Held and Benton C. Bainbridge, Maggie Lee, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, and Samson Young.*

## Artist Talk Saturday, April 6 | 3 PM

Alexa Horochowski is a multi-media artist who weaves together sculpture, video, and drawing in dramatic forms and epic displays. *Beautiful Sky* takes land based materials that are used in soil and water preservation and transforms them into abstract but somehow knowable forms. The effect is that the viewer experiences these functional materials in a new way, bringing that perspective then back to the land. In design and material, the objects broach the uneasy relationship between ecological sustainability and the market forces driving industry, farm production, and the politics of environmental stewardship. With sculpture that ranges from monumental to fragile and massive prints created with swirling trash, her art helps us look more closely at the seemingly futile attempts to keep nature from changing due to the Anthropocene era in which we live.

"Horochowski is a conceptual artist, who materializes forms that people experience as sculpture," says James Garland, Founder & President of Fluidity, and collaborator on the DMC's Heart of the City for Rochester. The sculptural forms she creates are eerie in how they both mask and reveal. It is a type of land art in the gallery, that responds, reflects, and acts on the contemporary issues around land use, taking into consideration a wider scope of global trade, post-colonial ethnic relations that takes land and water to supply a system that craves this resource rather than needs it.

Born and raised in Argentina, Horochowski, the daughter of an Argentinian-born doctor of Ukrainian heritage, moved to America's Heartland as a young girl with her family. Splitting an identity between South and North America, her work never allows the things most of us take for granted in America to sit still, but to radiate with new meaning. Horochowski is currently Professor of Art at St. Cloud State University and has received numerous grants and awards. Most recently she participated in the Forest Island Project artist residency in Mammoth Lakes, CA, that placed her within a dramatic landscape explored by land artists Nancy Holt, Robert Smithson, and Michael Heizer, and photographer Ansel Adams. Previous residencies include CASAPOLI, Coliumo, Chile, 2013, and Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Minneapolis, 2017. Horochowski's art can be found in private and public collections, including Walker Art Center, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Weisman Museum of Art. *Cochayuyo*, a double projection video installation by Horochowski is currently on view at the Walker Art Center.

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